

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 311 525

EA 021 025

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TITLE Improving School Climate.
INSTITUTION National Association of Secondary School Principals, Reston, Va.
PUB DATE May 89
NOTE 7p.
AVAILABLE FROM Publication Sales, National Association of Secondary School Principals, 1904 Association Drive, Reston, VA 22091 (\$1.50 prepaid on orders of \$15.00 or less; quantity discounts).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Journal Articles (080) -- Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)
JOURNAL CIT The Practitioner; v15 n4 p1-5 May 1989
EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Educational Development; *Educational Environment; Morale; *Organizational Climate; Secondary Education; *Student School Relationship

ABSTRACT

School climate improvements rely either on changes in the school's culture or changes in perceptions of the climate held by the school's employees and clients. To maintain and develop a culture that is supportive of school effectiveness, it is important to monitor the influence of the school's climate on student outcomes. The National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) has developed and validated an instrument for assessing the climate in secondary schools. Part of a battery of instruments and procedures included in the NASSP's Comprehensive Assessment of School Environments model, the climate assessment instrument can be used with parents, teachers, and students. Collected data are divided into 10 areas that the NASSP has identified as having predictor relationships to student outcomes. In planning for school improvement, the experiences of Kecoughtan High School in Hampton, Virginia, and of the North Medford High School in Medford, Oregon, are related to illustrate the use of the NASSP School Climate Survey. (KM)

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THE PRACTITIONER

NEA

A Newsletter for the On-Line Administrator

Vol. XV, No. 4

(ISSN 0192-6160)

May 1989

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Improving School Climate

Effective schools have effective leaders. Effective leaders, in any organization, must maintain and develop an organizational culture that is aimed toward achievement of goals and is perceived in a positive manner by both employees and clientele of the organization. Perceptions of the culture, held by employees and clients, constitute the climate of an organization.

To maintain and develop a school culture that is supportive of school effectiveness, the principal should carefully monitor the climate of the school and should plan for school improvement based on assessment of school climate. Climate assessment as a first step in school improvement is a standard recommendation, based on findings from research studies of effective schools and studies of school-based management.

To improve the climate of a school, changes must be made in the culture of a school, or employees and clients need to change their perceptions about the culture of the school; i.e., what the school is like and the quality of what happens in school must become more credible to those who have an active interest in the school and its outcomes.

Some Definitions

Some definitions used in this issue of the *Practitioner* are fundamental to the tasks of assessing school climate and planning for school improvement. These definitions are based on the work of NASSP's Task Force on Effective School Climate. This task force, named in 1982, has developed and validated NASSP's Comprehensive Assessment of School Environments (CASE) model. Critical definitions include:

● School Culture. The characteristics and traditions of a school and the citizens in its attendance area, including the history of the school; the formal and informal curriculum of the school; the aspirations of teachers and students and community members; the policies, rules, and regulations of the school; the demographic characteristics of teachers, students, and community members; the general understanding of "how things are" and "how things are done here."

● School Climate. The relatively permanent and enduring pattern of shared perceptions (of teachers, students, and community members) of the characteristics of a school and of its members, i.e., the enduring perceptions of the culture of the school. Climate is defined as conceptually distinct from satisfaction.

● Satisfaction. An individual's affective response to his or her environment at a given point in time. The job satisfaction of school employees (e.g., teachers, administrators, and other staff members) is part of the culture of a school; the satisfaction of students is both a part of the culture of a school and an outcome measure of school effectiveness.

● School Effectiveness. A school is effective (or less effective) according to the degree to which students attain outcomes that are measures of goals which the school and its community have established as important outcomes of schooling. Some research studies, some school improvement plans, and some practices used to measure school effectiveness are either contaminated or deficient in use. Measures of effectiveness should be school-based and be both credible and valid.

● Contamination. Measures or judgments about school climate or school effectiveness are contaminated when: something is measured that is not a valid measure of these concepts; or a measure is used to

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infer that a school is effective without actual measures of student outcomes. Common examples include using measures of satisfaction as measures of climate; using measures from a single role group (usually teachers) to infer the perceptions of other role groups, e.g., students; and, using measures or observations of teacher behavior as a basis for inferring student outcomes without actually measuring and monitoring the latter.

- **Deficiency.** A deficiency is present when a student outcome that is stated as an important goal of the school is not measured and monitored in making judgments about school effectiveness. The single most common example is to use only measures of achievement without corresponding measures of other goals that schools describe as important; e.g., self-esteem, self-efficacy, citizenship, ability to work with others, etc.

- **Credibility.** An improvement in school climate, and any related intervention, should have both credibility and validity. To be credible, significant role groups (teachers, students, and community members) must believe the practice or goal is important and attainable. One typical problem is selection of a practice that is credible with one group, but lacks credibility with other groups. A second example is introducing a practice or intervention that is credible, but lacks validity; i.e., is unlikely to influence the desired change in the school culture or climate.

- **Validity.** Something is valid when it is proven to be true. Two types of validity are important in planning practices to improve school climate and school effectiveness: content validity and predictor validity. A practice has content validity if it matches the intent and content of what is expected. A practice has predictor validity when the actual outcomes demonstrate that the practice permitted their attainment and when it is found to be correlated with other desired outcomes.

Planning

Careful planning for climate assessment and school improvement is essential if the process and the subsequent decisions are to be credible. A number of steps are important in the planning process:

1. Identify and confirm the goals of the district and the building that state expected student outcomes. Plan to measure goal attainment.

2. Identify valid measures of each student outcome that is important and expected. (Note: some school districts have board policies that identify ideal goals, but no systematic process is in place for monitoring goal attainment of such student outcomes as self-esteem, citizenship, critical thinking, etc.)

3. Select a measure of school climate that is credible and valid. A number of issues should be considered in the selection of an instrument: ease of administering; costs of administration; whether or not the instrument was developed for use in the school setting; whether or not the instrument can be used with differing role groups (parents, teachers, and students); whether or not the instrument was developed for use with the same age and grade levels that are present in the school; whether information is available about the reliability and validity of the instrument; ease of interpretation; usefulness of data for subsequent planning and decisionmaking; and whether or not the instrument has predictor validity (to student outcomes as measures of school effectiveness).

4. Preplan (with a school improvement team involving parents, teachers, and students) how data will be used from the climate assessment and from assessments of student outcomes.

Careful review of the professional literature is recommended as school teams begin the process of planning for both climate assessment and school improvement. One reference source is *Standards for Evaluations of Educational Programs, Projects, and Materials*, issued by the Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation. A source for identifying possible measures of student outcomes is the *Mental Measurement Yearbooks* from the Bureau of Education for the Handicapped at the University of Nebraska.

Identifying student outcomes and confirming the importance of these student outcomes within a school district and school attendance area can be a major task. In one representative school district, the following practices were followed:

- Board of education review of board philosophy as expressed in board policies.

- Board of education and administrative teamwork sessions to identify goal statements for the school district that represented: goals for student outcomes; and areas for which the district should have credible and valid measures of student outcomes.

- Assignments to both central office personnel and to building administrators to: identify the status of measurement practices being used for each goal at each grade level; and to identify feasible practices for measurement of each goal (especially for those goals that were not being measured or monitored).

- Collaborative meetings with employees to provide information and to obtain input; multiple sessions to develop awareness, solicit input, and obtain confirmation.

- Public meetings open to all citizens, with school-based efforts to stimulate attendance and participa-

tion, to discuss the goals and the definitions of each goal as well as the planned measures for each.

● Board revision and adoption of policy statements that stated the goals, identified responsibilities, and established baseline measures for monitoring the effectiveness of the schools in the district.

In this planning process, key activities were establishing and confirming goal statements, identifying how goal attainment was being measured (including what was not being measured), and identifying measures for each intended goal. Following are examples of the goal statements (including the local definitions):

1. Writing is the production of meaningful word patterns in permanent records. Students should be capable of writing their thoughts in a manner that can be understood by others.

2. Reading is the ability to decode and interpret the meaning of written symbols. Students should be capable of reading the English language.

3. Computation is the ability to perform the basic arithmetic processes accurately. Students should be capable of computing answers to problems using the four basic operations.

4. Critical thinking is the ability to analyze and evaluate information in order to make appropriate decisions and judgments. Students should be capable of seeking and using meaningful information to critique situations they encounter.

5. Cultural understanding is an awareness of, and sensitivity to, the diverse world in which we live. Students should be capable of working with individuals whose beliefs and values are different than their own.

6. Listening is the ability to hear and comprehend the verbal statements of others. Students should be capable of receiving and interpreting auditory stimuli.

7. Aesthetics is the appreciation of beauty and the ability to make judgments about "the beautiful." Students should be capable of judging beauty and describing the reasons for their selections.

8. Leadership is the ability to guide or influence the actions of others to reach a desired goal. Students should be capable of demonstrating leadership when they volunteer or are assigned to work with others to accomplish a task.

In this particular school district, 15 goals were identified including those listed above. One immediate outcome of the process was the discovery that the district was not measuring outcomes that were held to be important. Careful review of missing measures followed, e.g., selection of systematic measures to monitor the development of critical thinking skills.

The NASSP School Climate Survey

Knowing the student outcomes that are expected, and having measures for student outcomes, are necessary but not sufficient bases for planning for school improvement. Monitoring the culture of the school to determine how the culture is influencing attainment of student outcomes is also important. One way to monitor the culture of the school is to use periodic assessments of school climate.

The NASSP Task Force on Effective School Climate has developed and validated an instrument for assessing school climate in secondary schools. This instrument is part of the battery of instruments and procedures included in NASSP's Comprehensive Assessment of School Environments (CASE) model. The NASSP School Climate Survey can be used with parents, teachers, and students. Administration to all three groups permits comparison of perceptions and identification of possible discrepancies that may need attention. Data are reported in both numeric and visual formats. Procedures for use and interpretation are described in an examiner's manual. (For additional information, a CASE Sampler Kit can be ordered from NASSP for \$5.)

NASSP School Climate Survey data are reported for 10 scales:

● Teacher-Student Relationships. Perceptions about the quality of the interpersonal and professional relationships between teachers and students.

● Security and Maintenance. Perceptions about the quality of maintenance and the degree of security people feel at the school.

● Administration. Perceptions of the degree to which school administrators are effective in communicating with different role groups and in setting high performance expectations for teachers and students.

● Student Academic Orientation. Perceptions about student attention to task and concern for achievement at school.

● Student Behavioral Values. Perceptions about student self-discipline and tolerance for others.

● Guidance. Perceptions of the quality of academic and career guidance and personal counseling services available to students.

● Student-Peer Relationships. Perceptions about students' care and respect for one another and their mutual cooperation.

● Parent and Community-School Relationships. Perceptions of the amount and quality of involvement in the school of parents and other community members.

● Instructional Management. Perceptions of the efficiency and effectiveness of teacher classroom organization and use of classroom time.

- **Student Activities.** Perceptions about opportunities for and actual participation of students in school-sponsored activities.

These are the cultural areas identified by the

To Illustrate

Dennis O. Gillikin,
Principal

Kecoughtan High School
Hampton, Virginia

Business expends millions of dollars on customer satisfaction surveys to determine product acceptance. Can educators afford to do less? To refine a sense of educational product acceptance by the community, Kecoughtan High School chose to use the NASSP climate and satisfaction surveys.

The selection of an assessment survey became an important decision. The schools wanted to avoid a survey that would provide more questions than answers. Designing an assessment survey specific to Kecoughtan High School was considered but dismissed as counterproductive. After reviewing possible choices, the NASSP surveys were selected because they offered credibility, validity, national norms, a scoring package, a reasonable price, and clear and understandable data. One other factor affected the choice — the administration wanted the kind of data that would allow it to track annual progress in improving the school.

The *Examiner's Manual* for the NASSP surveys stressed the need for careful planning and the development of a written plan prior to administering the surveys. A faculty committee produced the plan, which included assignments, time lines, and faculty inservice. Crucial to the plan was surveying all teachers and students and a representative number of parents. The faculty survey was accomplished at an afternoon staff meeting. Students were surveyed the following day during third period classes. Parent surveys were collected for all students enrolled in math classes.

The wide range of ability and socioeconomic status for students in math classes provided a representative base for surveying parents. Answer sheets were mailed to the commercial scoring service for NASSP CASE surveys located at the Evaluation Center at Western Michigan University. Reports were returned to the school within three weeks.

The next step, formulating a school improvement plan based on the survey data, proved to be the most important step. In August (after surveying the school in May), the administrators and department heads attended a retreat with the objective of developing a school improvement plan. Using the survey data, the

NASSP task force as having predictor relationships to student outcomes. Two illustrations of the use of the NASSP Climate Survey in planning for school improvement are given below.

group identified eight areas of concern and developed eight goal statements for school improvement. After discussion, specific strategies and activities were planned and adopted by the group. This written plan was presented to faculty, students, and parents when school opened in the fall of 1988.

Use of the NASSP surveys in NASSP's Comprehensive Assessment of School Environments (CASE) model provided the school leadership team with valid and reliable data to make decisions and formulate a plan of action for school improvement. Perhaps the most important benefit of the use of the NASSP surveys was that, for the first time, Kecoughtan High School was able to identify areas of concern, formulate an action plan, and develop a continuous process of school improvement.

Fred Sutherland,
Principal

North Medford High School
Medford, Oregon

North Medford High School used the NASSP climate and satisfaction surveys as part of a school improvement process sponsored and funded by a \$75,000 grant from the state legislature. In May 1988, the climate and satisfaction surveys were administered to all students enrolled in grades 9-12. Members of the English Department administered the surveys after inservice by the School Improvement Team. Staff members completed the surveys on an individual basis after the materials were distributed and instructions were given at a staff meeting.

Parents were invited to attend an evening session; a mailed invitation was sent to every 10th family on the school enrollment list. Thirty-five parents, of 130 invited, attended a 45-minute session for explanation, instructions, and administration of the surveys.

Completed surveys were scored by commercial scoring services available at the Evaluation Center at Western Michigan University. The School Improvement Management Team shared the score reports with staff members at the beginning of the fall 1988 term. The data showed that the school was "typical" on all dimensions. This was neither surprising nor discouraging. A suspicion that this might be true was part of the motivation for undertaking a school improvement project. North Medford was doing O.K., but its goal was excellence. Improvement was needed and wanted.

The hard data from the NASSP surveys were used in the next step, a priority setting workshop. In

September 1988, 135 teachers, aides, students, and parents spent five hours in a Saturday workshop, setting by consensus, four priorities for improving school climate:

1. Student behavior and values
2. Teacher effectiveness
3. Curriculum
4. Student activities.

These priorities were labeled in a somewhat different manner from the scales of the NASSP survey instruments. The survey data were used to set priorities that accurately reflected the school's areas of planned emphasis.

Once the priorities had been set, the actual process of working toward school improvement was begun. By October, task forces had been formed and trained for each of the four priorities. Each task force included 6-8 teachers and at least one parent and one student. Teachers were invited to submit proposals for mini-grants aimed at improvement in a priority area. By April 1989, 25 proposals had been submitted and 20 had been funded. Each mini-grant proposal represented a teacher-initiated idea to improve school climate. Projects have included programs in Risk Retention, Peer Coaching, Applied Communications, and Student Recognition. Sixty-six of the 89 teachers on staff have participated in one or more of the following ways: as a member of the School Improvement Management Team; on a task force for one of the four priorities; or as a participant in one of the approved mini-grant projects.

Climate assessment as a first step in school improvement is a standard recommendation . . .

The process adopted at North Medford High School has made a significant contribution to the improvement of the climate of the school. Two surveys completed during the 1988-89 school year — one in December 1988, by the Northwest Regional Education Laboratory (Portland, Oregon), and one by the School Improvement Management Team in March 1989 — have shown an increased sense of collaboration, collegiality, and shared decision-making. The NASSP climate and satisfaction surveys will be administered again in May 1989. Outcomes of the mini-projects are not yet known, but the enthusiasm of those involved is clearly evident.

The most significant aspect of this process is that the school has developed a structure for ongoing climate assessment and planning for school improvement that has empowered teachers as agents of change. Teachers know that they have the influence, the information, and the processes to bring about significant improvement in the school.

Looking Ahead

Effective schools have effective leaders. Effective leaders monitor the culture and climate of a school and use these data to plan for school improvement. Effective leaders seek to make schools more effective and, at the same time, seek efficient ways to embody, in their interactions with teachers, parents, and community members, the principle: "This is not my school; this is not your school; this is our school."

Effective leaders are concerned both with the processes used and the outcomes that are attained. The emphasis, however, is on attainment of desired student outcomes. Effective school leaders must be certain that processes are selected not merely because "everyone is doing it" or "we like it." Instead, focus must be on selecting processes that are credible and lead to improved student outcomes.

One set of validated materials and procedures that can be used by secondary school principals to assess and monitor school climate and to plan for school improvement is NASSP's Comprehensive Assessment of School Environments (CASE) model. Validated instruments for measuring school climate and satisfaction are available. Scoring packages for district or building use, as well as commercial scoring services, are obtainable. If desired, consultant services are possible.

During 1989-1990, NASSP will complete an Information Management System (IMS) that will provide the principal with the means to store, retrieve, and analyze data on the entire school environment — including inputs, climate, satisfaction, and student outcomes. A bank of intervention strategies will be included in the IMS as an "idea pool" for planning school improvement.

The principal is the instructional leader of his or her school. An important part of instructional leadership is the continuing assessment of the school's culture and climate. The task is challenging — to make schools more effective and more efficient; and to create productive and happy environments for teachers, students, and community members.

This *Practitioner* was developed by Edgar A. Kelley, professor of educational leadership at Western Michigan University, and chairman of NASSP's Task Force on Effective School Climate. The contributions of members of NASSP's Task Force on Effective School Climate in the ongoing work of the task force are acknowledged. Appreciation for assistance is also extended to Paul S. Berge, CASE Scoring Services, the Evaluation Center, Western Michigan University; Marie E. Kelley, principal, Caledonia (Mich.) Junior High School; Dennis Gillikin of Kecoughtan High School, Hampton, Va.; and Fred Sutherland of North Medford (Oreg.) High School.